Juveniles Were a Problem in 1890

By James K. Nesbitt

Three Run-Away Rascals

WE HEAR A GREAT DEAL today about juvenile delinquency and careless parents, but the problem, apparently, is not a new one, though perhaps accelerated by modern living conditions.

In the 1890s Victorians were kept in a constant state of shock, and interest, by the goings-on of three small boys.

It's long ago, now, and the family has been forgotten, but only the initials will be used here, for the three small boys may still be living, very old men now; or they may have descendants, and one would not want to cause them any embarrassment, wherever they may be.

It was an open scandal the way Capt. and Mrs. C. seemed to neglect their family, and soon the boys were landing in police court for petty thievery.

We read in The Colonist of their appearance before a magistrate, in 1890: "Next in the court line came the three C. children—such little fellows that their heads could not be seen over the rail of the dock. They are remarkably handsome, with clear, dark eyes, innocent faces and curly hair that looks as if it had never made the acquaintance of comb or brush. In all their rags their natural beauty seems to shine to better advantage and they are always received with more of a fatherly than a judicial air by the magistrate.

"He looked them over for a moment, and then called to their father to step forward.

"Capt. C. did so, and pointing to the children His Honor continued: 'You see your children? Look at those rags on them!'

"'I'd like to be able to strip the clothes off your back and put them on your children.'

"'I got them all new clothes, nice new clothes, on the 24th of May,' interposed Capt. C. 'and they tore them up in two days.'

"'You take no care of your children,' continued the magistrate, 'and so you're the one to blame for their growing up criminals. You should see that they do right, and you should do right by them. I'll look into the law and if I can I am going to send you to jail yourself.'

"Capt. C. protested that he had made ample provision for his offspring, but whenever he went away they would run wild. He could take the youngest away and have him brought up properly, but the two others were incorrigibles, and he wanted them sent to the reformatory. The ages of the three boys, he said, were 14, 11 and nine."

And so into the reformatory went the three C. boys, but not for long.

IN OCTOBER of 1890 Victorians were reading this: "Once more free—It would seem as though the authorities of the provincial reformatory had yet to learn how very slippery the little C. boys really are. Their escape from that institution a few months ago, their outwitting of the police who attempted to recapture them, and their subsequent appearance in Seattle are all well-known. A few weeks ago they came home on a visit but were noticed by Officer Redgrave, and again placed behind the barred doors of the reformatory.

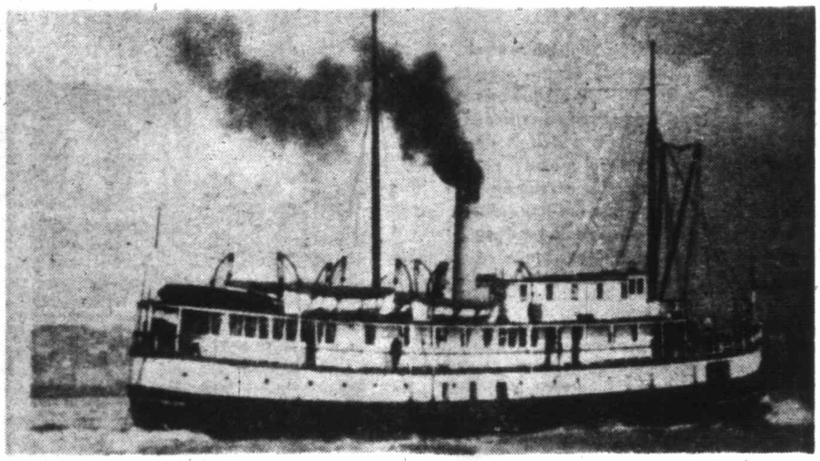
"Now the police are again engaged in a hunt for them; for on Sunday afternoon they once more tried the experiment of slipping over the wall without waiting to bid their custodians goodbye. The story of their departure shows how quick they are to take advantage of any circumstance that presents itself. On Saturday afternoon a wagon load of lumber was brought to the reformatory, and deposited in the enclosed yard for safekeeping till used. They took the lumber, piled it against the wall, and away they went.

"The C. boys are slippery as eels, and take as naturally to crime as the fish does to water. Superintendent Sheppard tells a true story of their exploits that illustrates how they will steal for the mere pleasure of stealing articles that can have no charm for them, and which cannot be used. Not long ago they fell in love with a stove which warmed the cabin of a certain sealing schooner at anchor in the harbor.

"They watched their opportunity and while the schooner was left for a few moments they boarded her with a canoe, and rigging a block and tackle had the heater out of the cabin and in the canoe in less than ten minutes. The owner of the schooner, returning was astounded to find a blank where the fire had been left blazing. The thieves with their booty were traced to Macaulay Point, where the stove was recovered, being too heavy for the boys to carry when they ran away."

A FEW DAYS LATER the C. boys were located:

". . . Turned up safe and sound and just as lively as ever in Tacoma, despite the fact that every means of departure from Victoria had been carefully guarded to prevent their escape. Once more they succeeded in evading those who were looking for them, and stowed away on the Willapa, which left the Outer Wharf for Sound ports on Monday morning. They were dragged from their hiding places and compelled to debark at Port Townsend, where they caught the City of Kingston and in her completed their trip to Tacoma. While the police are a trifle sore over the way the boys slipped through their fingers they are satisfied that the city can survive the loss of the young Jack Sheppards."



In this little steamer, the Willapa, the three boys made one of their frequent escapes from custody

The C. boys seem to have kept right on going from Tacoma. No longer were they seen in Victoria, and their parents didn't appear to know where they were, and they cared less.

In 1893 Postmaster Noah Shakespeare received a letter from Lewis H. Harper, the superintendent of the Philadelphia House of Refuge: "My dear Sir—Two little boys (where the third was isn't known today) named, respectively David and Charles C., were yesterday committed to this institution for vagrancy. These boys said their father, Frank C. resides in Victoria. They seem to have been roaming all over the country and doubtless their dear parents are entirely ignorant of their whereabouts and possibly, too, are very anxious about them.

"As I know no one in your place will you not be kind enough to turn this matter over to someone to see the parents, and acquaint them with the fact the boys are safe and well. What kind of people are the parents, and why have the boys left home? Let me know, too, what disposition should be made of them. Do they want them returned home, and will they advance sufficient money to send them? If so, by what route should they go? Any information concerning these children will be thankfully received . . ."

HOWEVER, the parents didn't want their boys, and next year Capt. C. died, as reported in The Colonist: "Capt. C., a resident of Victoria West and a well-known master of small steam craft, died at his home near Russell Station on Friday night.

"He had been up and about as usual, though not feeling quite himself, during the day, and in the evening complained of severe pains in the stomach and died in the arms of his wife while she was endeavoring to ease his sufferings.

"Dr. John A. Duncan, who was called in shortly afterwards, did not believe the man dead, and simple tests seemed to show that he was right in his opinion. A small vein of the arm was opened and the blood flowed sluggishly. In the morning it had ceased to flow and post mortem staining was plainly visible in evidence of death. A certificate of death assigns heart disease as the cause, and there will be no inquest, although such an example of suspended animation as was furnished on Friday night is very unnusual, in fact, hardly ever heard of."

A few months later two of the C. boys showed up in Victoria to see their mother, and the visit was duly recorded in The Colonist.

"Fred and Charlie C., the mischief-loving cause of many a news item for the Victoria press, spent yesterday in renewing acquaintance with the scenes of their many escapades and the associates of other days, being glad to reach home after their extended and adventurous journeys into foreign lands.

"They did not call upon the police, nor did the latter visit them, as it is hoped that the lads are in earnest in saying htat they 'have had enough of larking.' For their age—they are respectively 14 and 18 years of age . . . the C.'s have had their full share of excitement and a complete history of their adventures would fill a book, and not a particularly small volume, either.

"Fred claims to have been apprenticed to a shoemaker in Philadelphia, while his brother learned the trade of a chair repairer. In corroboration of this testimony Fred exhibits a pair of shoes which he proudly declares are the product of his own industry. As to his present intentions he has, he says, firmly decided to settle down and go to work. He has not yet got employment, but hopes to obtain work soon, and do his share . . ."

WHAT HAPPENED to the boys' mother at this time can not be traced. There is no record of her death. In any event, the children, other than the wandering boys, were taken care of by their eldest sister, who lived in Port Angeles.

The C. family certainly had plenty of publicity, and in March of 1895 there was this in The Colonist:

"Application is about to be made by Henry S. of Port Angeles for appointment as guardian of the children and estate of the late Capt. C. Mr. S., who is a prosperous contractor, is the husband of the eldest daughter, whom he married here several years ago, and she has come to Victoria with him to support the application.

"It was the purpose of visiting their sister that the three C. boys made their recent trip to Port Angeles in a little rowboat, and Mr. S. reports that the two younger, Charlie and Eddie, have since remained at his house, attending the public school and conducting themselves in an exemplary manner. He says they have already had their names upon the honor roll of the school, which is in keeping with the record of Charlie in the Victoria West school. The elder boy, Fred, went on to San Francisco from Port Angeles. Mr. and Mrs. S. have had charge for some time of the youngest member of the C. family, a bright little girl about eight years old. They are all anxious to take back with them an older girl of the family, now living as a member of the family of H. J. B. of Victoria West, who having adopted the child are loath to part with her. The estate to which the children are heirs consists of a good house and two lots in Victoria West."

However, the family of H. J. B. wouldn't part with the eight-year-old C. girl: "An application is now being made in the supreme court for the appointment of H. J. B. as guardian of Lillie C., a girl of about eight years, and sister of the now famous C. boys."

And that was the end, as far as we know today, of the C. family in Victoria.

It is not entirely a pleasant story, and we hope they all turned out well, and the purpose of recalling the tale is to show that in the 1890s there were problems of social welfare, perhaps more baffling than those of today.